

Silver Birch's real name revealed in new booklet

There can be few names in Spiritualism, or indeed in world-wide spiritual literature, as famous as that of 'Silver Birch', writes Sue Farrow.

But what do we actually know about the legendary guide, who communicated such profound and beautiful philosophical teachings through the trance mediumship of *Psychic News* founding editor Maurice Barbanell?

One thing we do know is that Barbanell was a decidedly reluctant trance medium.

"I was not keen on the trance condition," he wrote, "probably through my vanity in wanting to know what was said and done through my bodily mechanism."

We also know that most of those wonderful communications occurred during sittings of the six members of the Hannen Swaffer Home Circle, and that many of those teachings have since been included in the Silver Birch series of books published by the Spiritual Truth Foundation. Sales

of the books are thought to run into millions.

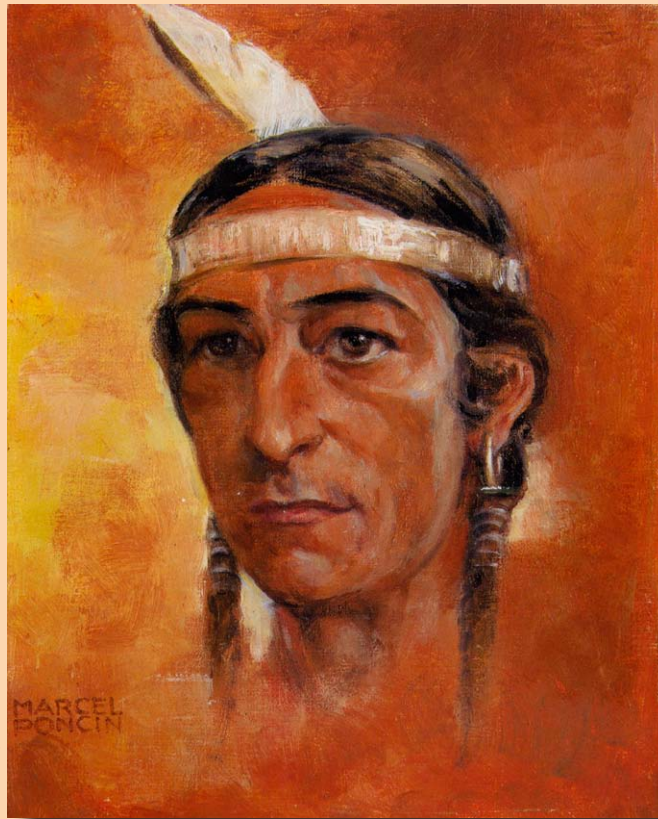
But Silver Birch's words first came to public attention through their publication in *Psychic News* and *Two Worlds*. Even in this, Barbanell was reluctant, feeling uncomfortable about publishing the results of his own mediumship in the publications he edited.

Hannen Swaffer, a world-renowned journalist at that time, disagreed and urged Barbanell to reconsider, suggesting that the guide's words would be "wasted" if they weren't shared more widely. After much argument Barbanell conceded, on condition that his identity as Silver Birch's medium was withheld. And so began what has been referred to as "the best kept secret in Spiritualism". It would be more than thirty years before Barbanell would go public about his

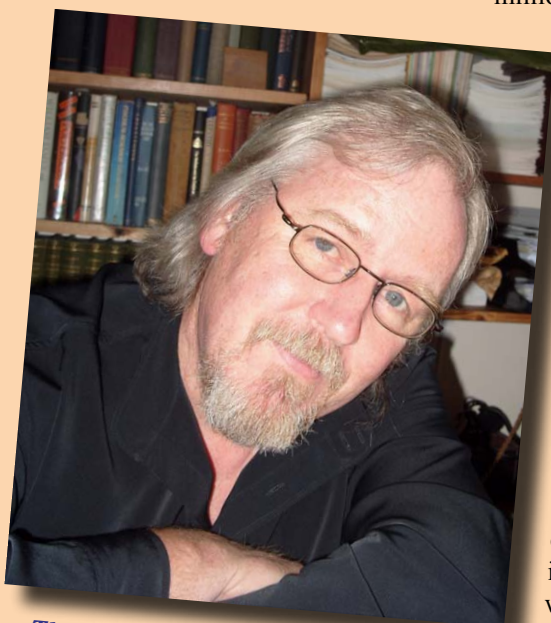
mediumship.

Thanks to the meticulous research of Spiritualist historian Paul Gaunt, curator of the Britten Memorial Museum and Library at the Arthur Findlay College, Stansted, last month saw the publication of a fascinating new booklet about Silver Birch, shedding further light on the much-loved guide. It also unravels, after years of speculation, the mystery surrounding his name.

As the booklet explains: "Silver Birch was first known by the name 'Big Jump', but when *The Teachings* were printed it was thought that a more suitable name should be used. Barbie [Maurice Barbanell] has said that the name 'Silver Birch' was decided one evening at a sitting and the next morning in his office he received a post card with a picture of a silver birch tree on the front. It had come from a member of the public he did not know."



Marcel Poncin's famous painting of Silver Birch, which hangs in the 'Psychic News' office.



The meticulous research of Spiritualist historian Paul Gaunt (above) has led to the publication of the new booklet.



The cover of the new Britten Memorial Museum booklet.

Paul Gaunt's booklet contains a wealth of other information about the two-world partnership of Maurice Barbanell and Silver Birch – arguably one of the most perfect marriages of medium and guide in Spiritualism's history.

It also includes the full text of an article by Hannen Swaffer, written in 1938 as the foreword to the first Silver Birch book – *Teaching of Silver Birch*. Swaffer details the beginnings of Barbanell's mediumship and his initial scepticism about entrancement.

"He laughed outright when, to use his own words, 'old women became Chinese and all sorts of people', only to be reproved by a medium who, in trance, said, 'You will be doing this before long.'

"Although he went away incredulous and sceptical, he returned the next week to the circle and then, half-way through, apologised for having fallen asleep. 'You



A signed photo (left) of Hannen Swaffer given to Maurice Barbanell for Christmas 1929.



Maurice Barbanell (above) was the medium Silver Birch used to communicate with the earth plane.

have been in trance,' said someone sitting next to him. 'Your guide gave his name and said that he had been training you for this for years and that, before long, you will be speaking on Spiritualist platforms.' Again, the young man laughed..."

Swaffer, at one time a theatre critic renowned for his sharp intelligence and even sharper tongue, with which he could make mincemeat of those he considered undeserving of praise, had no such reservations about Silver Birch.

"Silver Birch came into my life soon after I became a Spiritualist in 1924," he wrote. "Ever since then, I have listened, for an hour or more at a time, to his teaching, his guidance and his counsel, and learned to love and respect him more than I love and respect any earthly being."

Millions around the world who have since read the unique words of Silver Birch, will fully understand that.

•To obtain a copy of Paul Gaunt's booklet *Silver Birch*, email curator@snu.org

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